

# The year's greatest novel

**H**ER frenzied cry had broken a resolution from which he had sworn never to turn. And she, half conscious, sensed in this mysterious Arab-clad figure a security she had not known in all the years of marriage to her English husband—the most cruel man in Algiers!



Begin

## The Desert Healer

By EDITH MAUDE HULL

The Woman Who Wrote "The Sheik"

CAREW was nearing the last group of tumbled-down huts when a sudden sound breaking weirdly on the silence of the night sent his horse high on his heels in furious protest.

Hauling him down, Carew twisted in the saddle, listening intently. It came again, echoing from a little lane that straggled from the main street—the wail of a woman's voice crying wildly in French for help. A woman—in such a place and at such an hour! Carew's compressed lips parted in a mirthless grin. What was a woman doing at midnight in that village of ill repute? Some little fool, doubtless, who had tempted Providence too highly, paying the price of her folly! Well, let her pay! If all probability she had brought it on herself—she could abide by the consequences. It was no business of his anyhow. Why should he, of all men, interfere to help a woman in her need?

But as his great gray mount, Suliman, started forward the cry was repeated with words that made Carew check him with an iron hand and bring him, quivering, to his haunches. Clear and distinct they came to him—words of frenzied entreaty to a higher power than his, words in a language he least expected to hear.

"Help, help! O God, send help!"

An Englishwoman! For a moment he battled with himself. Then with a terrible oath he wrenched his horse's head round savagely and drove him down the little lane at a headlong gallop.

The lane was a *cul de sac*, the house he sought at the far end of it, for there only did a dim light filtering through an unshuttered window show any sign of habitation. Deep shadows masked the entrance, and a few feet short of it, in a patch of vivid moonlight, he pulled up and leaping to the ground raced towards the hidden doorway. His foot was on the crumbling step when out of the gloom three figures rose up to bar his entrance and hurled themselves upon him.

The attack was silent, and in silence he met it. There was no time to reach for the revolver, he had neglected to draw. Straining, heaving, he wrestled in the darkness with opponents whose faces he could not see, whose arms encircled him and whose clutching, sinewy hands tore murderously at his throat. A knife pricked him and with a blind instinct he caught at and held the hand that brandished it, crushing it in his strong fingers till he felt the yielding bones crack. At last with a tremendous effort he wrenched him-

self free and reeled back gasping into the patch of moonlight, his heart pounding against his ribs, perspiration pouring from him. And as the bright light struck across his face the men who had followed him swiftly drew back with sudden indetermination, muttering amongst themselves. He caught the words "El Hakim"—Desert Healer—the title he bore amongst the desert people, and almost before he realized it they had vanished.

For a moment he fought for breath, wiping the blinding moisture from his dripping face, fumbling for the revolver in his waistcloth. Then another strangled cry from within the lighted hut spurred him into action and he sprang forward, flinging back the heavy burnous from his shoulders as he ran. The rotting door crashed open under the sudden impact of his weight and in the entrance he halted with leveled revolver.

For a second only. His eyes sweeping the tiny room met those of a gigantic evil-faced Arab who, startled at his appearance, had flung to the ground the woman who struggled in his arms and turned to meet the intruder with a scowl of murderous ferocity. A grim smile of recognition flickered across Carew's face.

"Thou? Dog!" he thundered, and leaped at him.

For a moment the Arab wavered; then a knife flashed in his hand. But with a quick feint Carew dodged the sweeping blow and caught the upraised wrist. With his revolver pressing into the man's stomach he forced him back slowly against the wall of the hut, his fingers tightening their hold until the paralyzed hand unclenched and the knife clattered to the floor. Kicking it beyond reach, Carew backed a few paces and still keeping the Arab covered turned his attention for the first time to the woman.

Only a girl apparently, her face almost childish in its strained white piteousness, she had dragged herself up from the floor and was standing rocking on her feet in the middle of the room. He looked with a kind of cruel deliberation on the slender shaking limbs which, clothed in boyish riding dress that intimately revealed their delicate beauty, would have been the joy of an artist, but which filled him only with an acute feeling of antagonism. The folly of it, the shameless, senseless folly of it! A woman must be a fool and worse than a fool to expose herself thus

in a land of veiled femininity. His antagonism augmented and he viewed unmoved the signs of terrible struggle through which she had passed.

That she had fought desperately was evidenced in the marks of violent handling she bore, in the unbound hair that lay in curling chestnut waves about her shoulders, in the tattered silk shirt, ripped from throat to waist. She seemed unaware of Carew's nearness. Panting for breath, her hands clenching and unclenching mechanically, she stood like a driven animal at bay, her eyes fixed on the Arab in a wild unblinking stare.

Carew broke the silence abruptly with a blunt question addressed to her that was brutally direct. He spoke in French that both could understand and because he had no wish tonight to pass as other than an Arab himself. The harsh voice roused her to a realization of his presence. For a few seconds she stared at him uncomprehendingly; then her cheeks flamed at the meaning of his words penetrated. Her lips quivered and she shrank back, dragging the tangle of soft hair over her uncovered bosom with an instinctive gesture of modesty. She tried to speak but for some time no words would come; then a wail of entreaty burst from her.

"Take me away, oh, for God's sake take me away!" she cried, and buried her face in her hands with a convulsive shudder.

He jerked his head impatiently. The life he had led for the last twelve years had made him intolerant of convention; he had no intention of allowing it to interfere now with the rough and ready justice he was fully prepared to administer. He had no reason to hesitate. The Arab was a well known criminal, the abduction of an English visitor an offence the Algerian government could not condone.

"I will take you away when you have answered my question, madame," he said coldly. "This is no time or place for false modesty. Does he go free or—?" He raised his revolver with a gesture that was unmistakable.

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